

Archives Matter!: Spreading the Word in Australia

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For many years archivists in Australia had been talking about the need for a 'glossy brochure' as a way of promoting the archives profession and the work they do. In September 2004, the Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA) endorsed an Australian Society of Archivists proposal to develop such a brochure. The Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) envisaged that it would be of use to the archives sector as a whole, not just for ASA members. I was asked to chair a committee to oversee the production of the 'glossy brochure' which was published two years later as a 24-page booklet.

In 2005 a co-ordinating committee was formed of CAARA and ASA representatives to:

- plan the development of the brochure
- oversight the development of text, and
- select appropriate images to illustrate the archival endeavour throughout Australia

The Committee reported to both the ASA Council and to CAARA. It had representatives from the National Archives of Australia, 4 State records authorities (NSW, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia) with one State authority taking responsibility for liaising with the other 4 States and territories. Representing the ASA were the President, the Managing Editor, and members representing business archives, university archives and school archives.

Because the glossy brochure had been talked about for so long and many people had expectations about what it was going to be, what it would say and how it would look, I thought it was important to first get agreement to a project plan, so that all those expectations could be expressed and that agreement would be reached before the publication had been produced. My experience as Director of Publishing and Websites at the National Archives had taught me that it is better to address issues such as audience, style and process upfront, rather than to face the possibility of producing a publication that wasn't what was expected or wanted. I had also been editor of the ASA's journal *Archives and Manuscripts* for 5 years so had had good experience in dealing with both authors and archivists.

The project plan included our objective:

To develop a high quality brochure to be used to advocate for the archival sector in Australia. The brochure will raise the profile of archives in Australia, explain through its text and images what archives and archivists are, why they matter and should be valued, and provide some key facts and issues for the management of archives in Australia.

The publication *Changing the Future of Our Past*, developed by the National Council on Archives in the United Kingdom in conjunction with Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the National Archives, the Society of Archivists, and the Historical Manuscripts Commission, had been provided to Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities members as a model. The ASA had received permission from the National Council to model our publication on theirs.

The project plan identified the audience for the publication as the broad Australian public: 'It will engage people who might think that archives are of no interest to them and demonstrate their relevance to them. The brochure will also convince resource-allocators (such as politicians, chief executives, school principals, senior bureaucrats, committees and boards) that archives should be funded to undertake their important work but will not overtly address this audience alone.'

It was noted that the UK publication which had been provided as a model was written to convince parliamentarians of the need to revise the UK Public Records Bill and that this did not apply in the Australian context. The Committee saw the UK publication as a model only in the range of images of records and people interacting with archives, and that we needed to tell the Australian story with Australian examples and Australian voices. For example, one double-page spread features actor Cate Blanchett, bushranger Ned Kelly and Nobel prize-winning scientist Sir John Eccles, a Sydney Opera House design, and a petition for female suffrage.

In setting a style for the publication, the Committee wanted it to convey that archives are:

- interesting and engaging
- full of relevant and useful information (such as relating to the current debate on climate change)
- that archives are everywhere – in schools, banks, homes, shops, companies, governments and
- are relevant to all people in the community in their daily lives: people of all ages, whether born in Australia or immigrants, in whatever occupation or role.

We also wanted to convey that archivists and the archives they work in are:

- dynamic and progressive
- using the latest technology
- planning for the future
- a cultural and educational resource.

The plan stressed that negative images of archives should be avoided, that archives not be portrayed as only of relevance to the past, only of interest to academics and scholars, and only take the form of ancient handwritten or illuminated documents. Similarly archival institutions should not feature cobwebbed dungeons and attics, or appear to be staffed by stereotypes such as elderly, bespectacled, eccentric staff wearing cardigans.

Once the project plan had been prepared, three potential authors were approached – each had been identified by Committee members as meeting the selection criteria set down in the project plan: an author who was familiar with Australian archives - the range of archives in Australia, the issues, the work, and the uses made of archives, was able to write in an engaging style, and had a record of timely delivery of material. The author selected was Dr Hilary Golder, a professional independent historian who had written a number of institutional histories including the 50th anniversary history of the National Archives, a 150th history of NSW government, and was a past Board member of the NSW State Records Authority. She is a passionate advocate for archival research and an historian who understands that archivists can't keep everything.

Given that the brochure was to represent the whole archives sector we identified that the text would cover the breadth and depth of the archival endeavour in Australia and recognise both government and non-government archives, collecting and in-house archives, large and small archives, as well as business, community, church and school archives, particularly in its use of examples. The emphasis would be on the use of archives, rather than on the role which archivists have in encouraging best practice in recordkeeping.

Some of the topics identified for inclusion were:

- the value of what archives hold as assets, documenting personal, community, and financial rights and entitlements
- how archives are fundamental to the writing of history, the commemoration of anniversaries such as centenaries, and to the preservation of built heritage
- good news stories, particularly cases where archives saved the day
- what has been achieved with grants, sponsorship and collaboration with other sectors, and

- how archives in Australia are helping to progress social inclusion, education, online service delivery and other current government agendas.

The author was asked to provide draft text of approximately 5,000 words including a title for consideration by the Committee. I'll digress for a moment to talk about the title: after asking for suggestions from Committee members and not receiving any, I decided to insert the title 'Archives Matter!' and to send the next draft of the text out for comment, thinking that this would prompt someone to comment on the title and suggest a better one. In fact, no-one did comment on the title so my title stayed in by default. Sourcing images for the publication proved to be the most difficult aspect. We wanted to make sure that CAARA institutions were well-represented but not at the expense of smaller archives who wished to promote their collections.

The plan had said: 'There should be an even coverage in terms of place, date, gender, race, format, large/small archives, government/non-government institutions and a mixture of iconic images and documents as well as those representative of commonplace documents, such war service records, birth certificates, school reports.' A general 'call for images' was advertised in the *ASA Bulletin* and selection criteria were developed particularly addressing the stereotypes we wished to avoid. We wanted to have images of people interacting with archives as well as images of a full range of types of records.

We solved the problem of the cover by representing all eight States and territories with people or places. The small section of the Sydney Harbour Bridge for New South Wales, cricketer Sir Donald Bradman for South Australia, the map of the mining town Kalgoorlie for Western Australia, the photograph of the bombing of Darwin in the Second World War for the Northern Territory, and in the second row, the words and music for *Waltzing Matilda* composed in Queensland, the signature of Ned Kelly for Victoria, the stripes of the Tasmanian tiger, and the statue of Ethos representing the Australian Capital Territory.

Archives were asked to provide images at no cost, in a format suitable for inclusion in the brochure and with abbreviated citations. Every institution which submitted suggestions had at least one included. The larger institutions which have regular newsletters were best placed to provide many images of their activities but we had to make sure small archives were also represented.

Any joint venture of this nature undertaken in Australia always faces the 'tyranny of distance' – the designer, one other Committee member and I were located in Canberra; the author and three Committee members in Sydney (only three hour's drive away); then one in Melbourne (6 hours), one in Brisbane (2 days), and two in Perth (over 4 days' drive). We were only able to meet in person

at the Australian Society of Archivists Conference in Wellington (NZ) in 2005, in Port Macquarie in 2006 and at the launch of the publication in Alice Springs in 2007. Most of the deliberations of the Committee were by email with draft text, cover designs, and digitised images being sent out for consideration and comment on a regular basis. The most animated responses related to the colour of the cover and we had to have a democratic vote by email on this. There were at least seven drafts of the text, six different covers and five stages in the design of the booklet.

The reality of a joint committee representing a range of archives from large, well-funded government institutions to small, volunteer-run community archives was challenging. On the one hand, the large archives wanted to say that 'we are on top of electronic recordkeeping - we have all the answers', where small archives wanted to say that they did not have the tools or resources to manage electronic records. Government archives preferred not to criticise government funding of archives, whereas others, without government funds to call on, wanted to do so.

One of my tasks was to balance all the comments which said we hadn't mentioned a particular institution or project enough, with the comments that certain institutions or projects (often the same ones) were mentioned too often. As Australia is a federation of states we needed to make sure all states were included. Members of the Committee had been asked to provide examples of successful projects for social inclusion and community building, for instance. Some had come back with many examples and others none. Of course, we were trying to mention everyone but if no examples were provided we couldn't include that State.

Another task I took on was assisting the author to construct a list in the inside back cover. It begins 'Just some of the over 500 archives in Australia' and lists the larger institutions by name - Commonwealth and State Government and then general comments and examples for local government, universities, schools, churches, businesses, organisations, hospitals, local and regional and subject-based collections. The CAARA and ASA website addresses are given for more information, leading readers to the ASA's Directory of Archives in Australia.

Since the launch of the publication in August 2007, multiple copies have been provided to CAARA members and one copy to each ASA member. ASA officeholders, Branches and Special Interest Groups have been encouraged to take a small stock to have on hand. It has been used to lobby politicians, chief executive officers and others about the value of archives, handed out to students and others at training courses, at trade fairs and at careers days. It is available from many archives in their reading rooms. A version of the publication is available on the ASA website at www.archivists.org.au.

We are due to evaluate the publication later this year and I'm sure that there will be many good suggestions made which will improve it – often people find it easier to have something to see and comment on rather than make comments about a concept. An evaluation form will be forwarded to all CAARA and ASA members seeking their feedback on the text, images and style, and on whether the publication has met its stated objectives. This feedback will be considered before reprinting the brochure and will also inform any spin-off products such as a new online version or a summary brochure.